

## WRITING CENTER BRIEF GUIDE SERIES

# A Brief Guide to Writing the English Paper

## The Challenges of Writing About English Literature

**Writing begins with the act of reading.** While this statement is true for most college papers, strong English papers tend to be the product of highly attentive reading (and re-reading). When your instructors ask you to do a “close reading,” they are asking you to read not only for content, but also for structures and patterns. When you perform a close reading, then, you observe how form and content interact. In some cases, form reinforces content: for example, in John Donne’s Holy Sonnet 14, where the speaker invites God’s “force” “to break, blow, burn and make [him] new.” Here, the stressed monosyllables of the verbs “break,” “blow” and “burn” evoke aurally the force that the speaker invites from God. In other cases, form raises questions about content: for example, a repeated denial of guilt will likely raise questions about the speaker’s professed innocence.

When you close read, take an inductive approach. Start by observing particular details in the text, such as a repeated image or word, an unexpected development, or even a contradiction. Often, a detail—such as a repeated image—can help you to identify a question about the text that warrants further examination. So annotate details that strike you as you read. Some of those details will eventually help you to work towards a thesis. And don’t worry if a detail seems trivial. If you can make a case about how an apparently trivial detail reveals something significant about the text, then your paper will have a thought-provoking thesis to argue.

## Common Types of English Papers

Many assignments will ask you to analyze a single text. Others, however, will ask you to read two or more texts in relation to each other, or to consider a text in light of claims made by other scholars and critics. For most assignments, close reading will be central to your paper.

While some assignment guidelines will suggest topics and spell out expectations in detail, others will offer little more than a page limit. Approaching the writing process in the absence of assigned topics can be daunting, but remember that you have resources: in section, you will probably have encountered some examples of close reading; in lecture, you will have encountered some of the course’s central questions and claims. The paper is a chance for you to extend a claim offered in lecture, or to analyze a passage neglected in lecture. In either case, your analysis should do more than recapitulate claims aired in lecture and section.

Because different instructors have different goals for an assignment, you should always ask your professor or TF if you have questions. These general guidelines should apply in most cases:

- **A close reading of a single text:** Depending on the length of the text, you will need to be more or less selective about what you choose to consider. In the case of a sonnet, you will probably have enough room to analyze the text more thoroughly than you would in the case of a novel, for example, though even here you will probably not analyze every single detail. By contrast, in the case of a novel, you might analyze a repeated scene, image, or object (for example, scenes of train travel, images of decay, or objects such as typewriters). Alternately, you might

analyze a perplexing scene (such as a novel's ending, albeit probably in relation to an earlier moment in the novel). But even when analyzing shorter works, you will need to be selective. Although you might notice numerous interesting details as you read, not all of those details will help you to organize a focused argument about the text. For example, if you are focusing on depictions of sensory experience in Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale," you probably do not need to analyze the image of a homeless Ruth in stanza 7, unless this image helps you to develop your case about sensory experience in the poem.

- **A theoretically-informed close reading.** In some courses, you will be asked to analyze a poem, a play, or a novel by using a critical theory (psychoanalytic, postcolonial, gender, etc). For example, you might use Kristeva's theory of abjection to analyze mother-daughter relations in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. Critical theories provide focus for your analysis; if "abjection" is the guiding concept for your paper, you should focus on the scenes in the novel that are most relevant to the concept.
- **A historically-informed close reading.** In courses with a historicist orientation, you might use less self-consciously literary documents, such as newspapers or devotional manuals, to develop your analysis of a literary work. For example, to analyze how Robinson Crusoe makes sense of his island experiences, you might use Puritan tracts that narrate events in terms of how God organizes them. The tracts could help you to show not only how *Robinson Crusoe* draws on Puritan narrative conventions, but also—more significantly—how the novel revises those conventions.
- **A comparison of two texts** When analyzing two texts, you might look for unexpected contrasts between apparently similar texts, or unexpected similarities between apparently dissimilar texts, or for how one text revises or transforms the other. Keep in mind that not all of the similarities, differences, and transformations you identify

will be relevant to an argument about the relationship between the two texts. As you work towards a thesis, you will need to decide which of those similarities, differences, or transformations to focus on. Moreover, unless instructed otherwise, you do not need to allot equal space to each text (unless this 50/50 allocation serves your thesis well, of course). Often you will find that one text helps to develop your analysis of another text. For example, you might analyze the transformation of Ariel's song from *The Tempest* in T. S. Eliot's poem, *The Waste Land*. Insofar as this analysis is interested in the afterlife of Ariel's song in a later poem, you would likely allot more space to analyzing allusions to Ariel's song in *The Waste Land* (after initially establishing the song's significance in Shakespeare's play, of course).

- **A response paper** A response paper is a great opportunity to practice your close reading skills without having to develop an entire argument. In most cases, a solid approach is to select a rich passage that rewards analysis (for example, one that depicts an important scene or a recurring image) and close read it. While response papers are a flexible genre, they are not invitations for impressionistic accounts of whether you liked the work or a particular character. Instead, you might use your close reading to raise a question about the text—to open up further investigation, rather than to supply a solution.
- **A research paper.** In most cases, you will receive guidance from the professor on the scope of the research paper. It is likely that you will be expected to consult sources other than the assigned readings. Hollis is your best bet for book titles, and the MLA bibliography (available through e-resources) for articles. When reading articles, make sure that they have been peer reviewed; you might also ask your TF to recommend reputable journals in the field.

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## Taking the First Steps: Close Reading Towards a Thesis

Below are two examples of how close reading can help you work towards formulating a thesis for your paper. While neither is a complete recipe for an English paper, both should give you some idea of the kinds of textual features close readers look for and the kinds of questions they ask.

### **Example #1: Close Reading Prose**

Let's say that you decide to write on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's autobiography, *Confessions*. Rousseau's autobiography is notably the work of a novelist, and it has been read as a novel by numerous scholars of literature. Because Rousseau's *Confessions* is a long work, your analysis will need to be selective. One way to narrow your focus is to look at a pattern of repetition: a repeated scene (say, a theft), a repeated object (say, a book), or a repeated word (say, "heart"). If a scene or an object is depicted repeatedly, it is probably important for the book as a whole. In most cases, it will be depicted in different ways that complicate or conflict with each other. A consideration of this kind of friction could trigger a thought-provoking thesis. Here's one way you might break down the process of reading towards a thesis:

- 1) **Identify a pattern of repetition.** Let's take the example of the word "heart." Rousseau uses this word compulsively. From page one, "heart" seems to designate Rousseau's most authentic and sincere self; it also seems to serve as a guarantor of "truth," for instance when Rousseau asserts that his "heart is content" with the accuracy of the autobiographical stories he has recounted. But it is worth wondering whether a word used as frequently as "heart" might have some other, less obvious meanings. As mentioned, it is rare in a literary work for a charged, often repeated word to mean exactly the same thing every time. As you read Rousseau's *Confessions*, mark all the instances of the word "heart." Once you have finished the book, you can then proceed to...

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- 2) **Make a list of passages in which the word "heart" appears.** This should be a list not just of page numbers but of quotations. With a couple of pages of "hits" for the word "heart," you will have a body of data that you can begin to analyze.
- 3) **Identify the different meanings of the word "heart" and analyze their relationships.** How does "heart" seem to function primarily, according to Rousseau? And what other functions and capacities does it have in the text? You might notice that Rousseau's heart is very susceptible to fantasies: when he fantasizes about being a soldier, his "heart swelled at this noble idea"; elsewhere, he admits that "love of the marvelous comes naturally to the human heart." In these cases, the heart seems to foster illusions—quite a contrast to the primary definition of the heart as a sincere guarantor of truth! This tension is worth identifying and analyzing. If Rousseau's autobiography is invested in a heart-based model of the self, what are some of this investment's unexpected consequences for how the autobiography constructs a self—consequences which Rousseau himself doesn't acknowledge? As you notice relationships between different meanings, ask questions about them. The meaning of the word "heart," however obvious it might be to you in day-to-day conversation, is not obvious in Rousseau's autobiography. Use the less obvious meanings and functions to interrogate the more obvious meanings and functions.
- 4) **Select a "friction-rich" relationship to focus on in your thesis.** Some of the meanings of "heart" will seem more unexpected than others. In your paper, you need not account for *every single* usage of the word "heart"; select the examples that are most in tension with the primary meaning of "heart" as the seat of an authentic self and a guarantor of truth. With the above data, you are in a position to make an argument about how a self gets constructed in Rousseau's work and what the unacknowledged limitations of that construction are. So you might argue the following: "From the outset, Rousseau's autobiography represents the heart as the seat of Rousseau's most authentic and truthful self. However, as Rousseau's personal narrative develops, the heart assumes other functions: it fuels personal fantasies and superstitions, for example. The conflict between Rousseau's early, dominant characterization of the heart and its later more delusional capacities suggests that the concept of an authentic self is more volatile, more unreliable, than Rousseau admits. Indeed, insofar as a self's authenticity rides on the subjective emotions of the heart, authenticity appears to be a rather unreliable guarantor of truth. If Rousseau's autobiography formulates a model of the authentic, feeling self that remains familiar today, it ultimately puts pressure on that model."

Notice that this thesis does not judge Rousseau as a human being. Instead, it makes a claim about how a self is constructed in a particular work—a work that occupies a particular historical moment when selves have a particular vocabulary available to them. Ultimately, you are analyzing “a piece of language” and not a human being. Consequently, you do not need either to judge or to justify Rousseau. Write about Rousseau’s autobiography as you might write about a first-person fictional narrative (which, like Rousseau, has a culturally-specific vocabulary with which to depict a self).

Finally, keep in mind that there are a number of ways to approach Rousseau’s text. Analyzing a pattern of repetition is hardly the only one. For example, you might close read a pivotal scene in the *Confessions*, such as the scene in which Rousseau accuses a maid of stealing a ribbon that he himself has stolen. Even when focusing on a pivotal scene, however, you would probably analyze it in relation to other moments in the text in which Rousseau discusses guilt, relationships with women, etc. Usually it is through a set of relationships between words, images, or scenes that one can better understand the significance of a single scene.

In short, as you start to make sense of the poem, consider the conventions and structures of the poetic genre you’re encountering.

### Example #2: Close Reading Poetry

Let’s say you’re asked to write a paper about William Wordsworth’s sonnet, “Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802.” At first reading, the poem might seem like a straightforward, ‘poetic’ description of what the speaker sees and feels while looking at London one beautiful summer morning. But how might you figure out what else is going on in the poem?

1) **Begin by identifying structures and developments in the text. Look for unexpected developments.** Notice that Wordsworth’s poem is a modified Petrarchan sonnet, consisting of an octave (or, two quatrains) and a sestet. (The rhyme scheme goes abba abba cdecde, instead of the usual Petrarchan cdecde.) Usually in a Petrarchan sonnet there is a turn (or volta) between the octave and the sestet. This is a good place to start looking for transitions and developments in the poem, but it’s not the only place to begin. When reading this poem you might also consider the relevance of the structure of the English sonnet, in which the final couplet (the final two lines) marks a development in the speaker’s attitude—

some change in point of view or mood. In short, as you start to make sense of the poem, consider the conventions and structures of the poetic genre you’re encountering.

In the case of Wordsworth’s sonnet, you might consider the final two lines (as a quasi-couplet in the English tradition): “Dear God! The very houses seem asleep/ And all that mighty heart [i.e., the city] is lying still!” There’s a lot of emotion in these final lines, as the exclamation marks suggest. But what kind of emotion is it? Has it changed since the earlier description of the speaker’s pleasurable response to “a sight so touching”? To get a handle on the final couplet, you might consider that a “still” heart amounts to a dead heart. So by the final line, the poem seems to be in unexpectedly sinister territory, in contrast to the superlatively “fair” city of the first line. This contrast marks a strange, unexpected development—a development worth analyzing further. To that end, you might ask: How does the poem arrive at the strange final couplet? In other words, you need to...

2) **Analyze how the unexpected development happens:** You’ve noticed a transition from a “fair” city to a dead city. How does the speaker get from “fair” to dead? Look for figures—for metaphors, similes, synecdoches, personifications, etc. (For more on figures, see the indispensable Abrams, cited below.) In Wordsworth’s poem, the speaker notably personifies the city from line 4 onward, where the city “doth, like a garment, wear/ The beauty of the morning; silent, bare.” So the city takes on the aspect of a human being (which can die), and the poem has now moved from the realm of empirical description to fiction (as line 13’s use of “seem” suggests).

3) **Reflect on the significance of the unexpected development in the poem as a whole:** Having noticed an unexpected development puts you in an excellent position to begin formulating a thesis. Your thesis won’t simply point out the development, however; it will make an argument about the development’s *significance*. To recap, we have observed a transition from beauty to something more sinister, a transition enabled by the use of figurative language (specifically, personification). So figurative language is the mechanism that appears to enable, even trigger, the unexpected development. It appears to have a power—an agency—not only to vivify but also to kill what it depicts.

As you consider this development and how it happens, you might look for moments when this development is foreshadowed: notice, for example, words like “lie” (in the line “Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie”: why “lie”? Why don’t they “stand”?) and phrases like “a calm so deep”—which might describe sleep, but could also describe death.

4) **Parlay the unexpected development into a thesis:** With these observations in mind, we might devise a thesis

about the volatile power of poetic language dramatized by the unexpected development from life to death in Wordsworth's poem. We might argue that: "Wordsworth's sonnet about London offers a case study about the volatility of poetic language. If poetic language begins by vivifying the city through personification, ultimately personification depicts the city's demise. In short, the poetic device that represents the city's beauty is as volatile as it is powerful, exemplifying the instability of poetic language. Notice a couple of features of this thesis:

- It identifies a transition (from vivified beauty to death) and gives an account of the significance of that transition (the 'culprit' is a volatile poetic language, which is no mere passive tool as it turns out).

- The thesis identifies a tension between two moments in the poem and doesn't try to tidy up or argue away that tension. This thesis is interested in a complication, in the unexpected and even uncomfortable transition from life to death. Weird complications tend to offer richer material than complications easily overcome and tensions tidily reconciled.

- The thesis isn't particularly combative or controversial. Instead, it offers a way of understanding the poem that wouldn't be apparent to a first-time reader, engaging the conceptual question of poetic language's power by analyzing particular details in the poem itself.

## QUESTIONS TO ASK AS YOU READ A TEXT

Below are some questions that will help you develop a more active and interrogative mode of reading. Not all of these questions will be appropriate for every text, of course, and sometimes the answers to appropriate questions still won't yield potential theses. Nonetheless, these questions provide a good starting place for close reading.

### For novels and short stories

- What is the genre of the text? What are the conventions of that genre, and what do those conventions lead us to expect as readers? Are those expectations always realized? Is there a mix of genres (as there is, for example, in *Jane Eyre*, which is a gothic bildungsroman)? If so, how do the conventions of those different genres interact? (In the case of *Jane Eyre*, there's a fraught interaction between development or "bildung" (which looks ahead to the future) and haunting (which implicates the past).)
- Is the narrator first- or third-person, omniscient or not? What does the narrator's position suggest about the characters and events depicted in the text? How much do we know about the narrator? How reliable is he or she?
- Does anybody (narrator included) contradict himself or herself? How can we make sense of this contradiction? Does it mark a development, a response to a new environment, or something else?
- Is there a gap in the story—a secret or an event that is never depicted but only alluded to? What is the effect of such a gap on how we read the story? How can we analyze the gap without trying to fill it in? For example, in Henry James' novel *The Turn of the Screw*, we are never informed of the substance of Quint's horrifying crime against the children. Rather than trying to name the crime, we can instead analyze how the story's gaps and secrets induce a "paranoid" mode of reading, whereby every detail seems to harbor deep, repressed meanings.

### For Poems

- What kind of poem is this? What is the poem's rhyme scheme? How does its rhyme scheme structure and dramatize the poem's content?
- What kinds of relationships develop between rhymed words? Do rhymed words reinforce each others' meanings or ironize them? For example, Alexander Pope's poem, *The Rape of the Lock*, regularly pairs serious and trivial words, such as "despair" and "hair" to exemplify the intimacy of serious emotions and trivial circumstances in his mock-epic poem.
- Who is the speaker? What can we infer about his or her environment? Does his or her mood remain constant throughout the poem or does it change? What are the significant changes of mood and mind in the poem?

In the case of drama, you will likely ask a combination of questions relevant both to prose and to poetry. Finally, notice what kinds of questions are *not* listed above. For example: *what did the author intend?* In some single-author courses you might work with manuscript drafts and biography, and thereby have sources with which to speculate about an author's intentions. More often, however, you will not have enough evidence to speculate intelligently about the author's intentions. In the absence of such evidence, orient your claims towards the text.

## Tips and Conventions

Like any genre, the English paper follows some conventions you'll want to be aware of. If you have any questions about your paper, consult your TF or professor—for clarification on the assignment, for tips on how to approach the paper, and to receive preliminary feedback on paper ideas. If the guidelines offered here conflict with what your TF or professor tells you, you should of course follow their advice.

- **Avoid plot summary.** A paper that recounts what happened in a novel (or a play)—or that analyzes selected scenes in the same order they occur in the novel—is letting the novel's author rather than the paper's author structure the paper's argument. Sometimes papers fall into plot summary because a student imagines that he or she is writing for a reader unfamiliar with the novel. But if you imagine that you are writing for someone who has read the novel at least once, then you don't need to rehearse the plot for your reader. Instead, you can focus on selected scenes, briefly identifying them before analyzing significant details. Resist shadowing the novel's chronology in your own paper. One rule of thumb is to begin with the most obvious piece of evidence and move progressively to the least obvious piece of evidence. Ultimately, you should plot your own paper.
- **Use block quotations appropriately.** When quoting longer stretches of prose (more than four lines in your paper), set it off from the body of the paper in an indented block quotation. In the case of poetry, more than three lines of verse should be quoted *en bloc*. Block quotations are a great opportunity to do some extended close reading. When you use a block quotation, make sure that it is rich enough to reward extended analysis (which should be at least as long as the quotation itself). A well-chosen block quotation will not only corroborate a claim that you have already argued, but will also offer a new, related emphasis or implication for your argument to pursue. In this way, block quotations can help your argument to maintain momentum, averting the stagnant paper structure in which a thesis is followed by a list of illustrative examples.
- **Avoid basing your argument on opinion.** Sometimes a work of literature provokes personal feelings and opinions in a reader. When this happens, the reader should try to suspend those personal feelings and opinions as he or she close reads, paying attention instead to structures and features in the text. Textual evidence and not personal conviction should be the basis of your thesis and argument.
- **Focus on speakers, not authors:** Because English papers make claims about texts rather than about authors, first-person poems and narratives have a “speaker” or “narrator” who should not be confused with the author. David Copperfield, while he has autobiographical features, is not Charles Dickens himself. Likewise, “Rousseau” in his *Confessions* is a linguistic construct with an ambiguous relationship to the man himself. Therefore, as a reader of Rousseau's *Confessions*, you have evidence to make a claim about the linguistic construct or “character” of “Rousseau” rather than about “Rousseau” the man.
- **Write in the present tense.** Because English papers approach literary works as linguistic artifacts rather than as historical documents, they discuss characters and events in the present tense rather than the past tense. For example, one might write: “In *Middlemarch*, Dorothea expresses relief that Casaubon does not enjoy piano music.”  
  
If you're taking a historicist approach to literary analysis, keep in mind that when referring to historical events outside of the novel you should use the past tense, as you would in a history paper. For example, “Although Dorothea has little interest in music, George Eliot herself was very interested in music.”
- **Use MLA style citations.** Because English papers quote frequently, often from the same text, they cite page numbers parenthetically. For example: “Dorothea expresses disdain for “domestic music and feminine fine art” (65).

### FURTHER READING

- Abrams, M.H. and Geoffrey Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 9th ed. Boston: Wadsworth Publishing, 2008.
- Joseph Gibaldi, *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. 6th ed. New York: MLA, 2003.